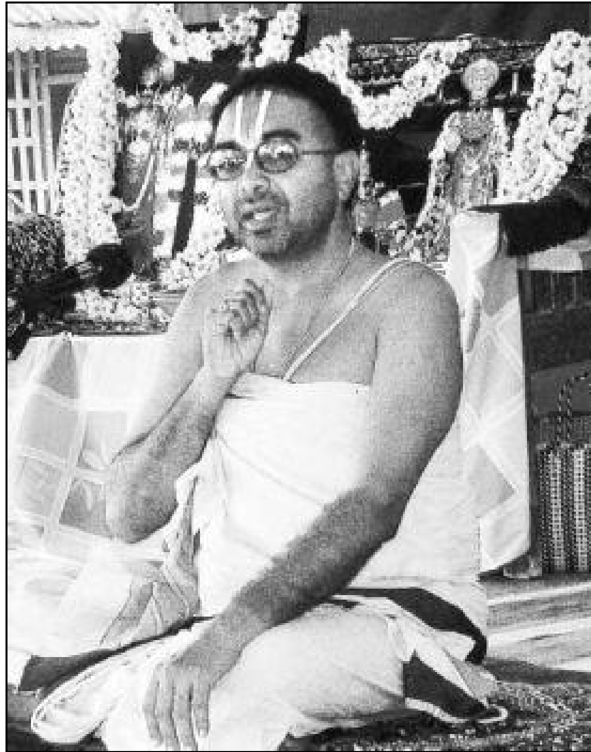
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Dedicated to the cause of sanatana dharma

``The youth have to return to their rich spiritual past to tackle the evils of modern life,'' says Velukkudi Krishnan to PREMA NANDAKUMAR in this interview.



Velukkudi Krishnan ... never fails to reach the listener. — Pic. by R. M. Rajarathinam

AMONG THE traditional exponents of Sri Vaishnavism in post-independent India, Velukkudi Varadachariar held a very high position. He belonged to that generation which simplified scholarly diction to help the common man understand the tenets of Sri Vaishnavism well and also enjoy the subtle nuances in the hymns of the Azhwars, the sublime thoughts in the Ramayana and the glorious Sanskrit poesy of the Acharya parampara. It was with great shock that we heard of the sudden withdrawal of Sri Varadachariar from the earth-scene in 1991. However, comfort streamed into our hearts with the emergence of his son, Velukkudi Krishnan, as a brilliant orator. An added joy is that Sri Krishnan can deliver his lectures fluently in English as well. Today Sri Krishnan has a global audience listening to him with rapt attention. What is more heartening is that the younger generation flocks to his lectures in large numbers. The future of Sri Vaishnavism (and thereby the future of Sanatana Dharma itself) is definitely safe in his hands.

Listening to Sri Velukkudi Krishnan is an experience in itself. He never raises his voice but there

is such crystal clarity in his speech and pronunciation that everyone remains focussed on the lecture. His attention to detail and impeccable time-sense see to it that there are no shuffling of feet or whispered syllables from the listeners. Whether he is sitting in front of an audience or walking around in a temple while delivering his Tiruppavai lectures for television channels, he gets the total attention of his listener. Widely travelled and carrying his mind-boggling scholarship lightly, Sri Krishnan is delivering this year's Tiruppavai lectures at Srirangam in the mornings and lectures on Sri Ranga Mahatmyam in the evenings.

It was an experience to watch him remain completely focussed on his mission for the spread of Sanatana Dharma among the youth generation when he kindly answered some questions on his ministry for Sri Vaishnavism, taking time off from his busy schedule.

You were pursuing a career as a Chartered and Cost Accountant. What made you give up that lucrative area for the uncertain career of a religious speaker which must involve a good deal of travel?

Well, I guess it was destined to happen. I had no idea of giving up my chosen profession where I was doing very well. But the sudden passing away of my father was totally unexpected. He had been giving Tiruppavai lectures in December and the end came suddenly. Mrs. YGP then persuaded me to give a few lectures. At first I was unsure of myself, but then it was as if I was following my father's wishes. Not that it was easy at first to give up the job. But my father had always said that he was giving me ``an English education'' so that there would be a wider scope to spread Vaishnavism, and that I would be able ``to connect'' with the younger generation, in case I did follow his career.

I must also confess that I have still links with my profession to help me run the household, so that I can use these lectures as a service-oriented activity.

Listening to you, one never knows from where the next quotation is going to come: it could be the Vedas, Ramayana, the Divya Prabhandham, the Manipravala commentaries, the stotras of Acharyas. Was it all learnt from your father or did you undergo any special training?

Of course, my father has been my only teacher of traditional Srivaishnavite texts. I started learning from him when I was hardly six years old and this continued till his passing. But he also placed me in the Sanskrit College to learn Nyaya, Mimamsa and the like. As I was pursuing regular, secular education elsewhere, this was rather informal, but there were renowned scholars led by Sri Sivarama Dikshitar and the learning benefited me no end. One needs this strong base to be a successful expounder of the Vaishnava granthas.

How do you gauge the mood of your audience? Do you change your style of delivery according to them?

Certainly. A good speaker has to be a good observer of his audience and one can get a fairly accurate idea of the audience in the first 15 minutes. In fact, the audience component differs from place to place. Sometimes it is strictly traditional, sometimes it expects a contemporaneous thrust, and quite often the younger audience, once it gets involved, is vibrantly alive.

I have to shape the level of philosophy, the type of quotes and the style of delivery to suit the audience, without ever giving up my individuality and style. This takes some time, but is not

difficult. Thus, you will find me quoting a-plenty from Tamil classics like "Tirukkural" and "Silappadhikaram" in my television appearances.

Again, if the audience is already attuned to my presentation, I draw them further in the adventure of bhagavad-anubhava. For instance, if I have been giving Tiruppavai discourses for seven years running in a Sabha, I have to see that it is not repetitive. The audience has heard me before, and so they are prepared if I draw them to subtler nuances in the text. In effect, it is a never-ceasing adventure.

Of course, speeches abroad are tailored in a different way. A minimum of half an hour has to be set apart for interaction, and you would be surprised and happy to know how intelligent, anxious and erudite some of the questioners are. The younger generation, especially, is quite vocal in these sessions. The Karma theory is a favourite with them. The elders seem to take it for granted that there is no relation to what we do on earth and the fruits we receive here, for they have total faith in surrender and think the Lord's will prevails. The youth, however, wants to know the why and wherefore of the results of actions, and why it should be so.

Ah yes, your foreign audience. Speaking in Tamil, it becomes a natural movement to and from the Sanskrit language. But conveying Indian philosophy and mysticism in English could be daunting. How do you go about gathering the required religious diction?

Honestly speaking, I have a problem. In the beginning it was quite daunting, and I am by nature averse to reading out a prepared speech. Dictionaries are a help but this is very limited as one deals with Sanskrit words that have subtle variations. Take for instance the word `surrender' for `saranagati.' How are we to distinguish between Bharata's `paratantrya' and Lakshmana's `seshathva', the two types of `surrender'? Usually I give the Sanskrit word and then explain it by giving examples.

Are you interested in gradually integrating choice English quotes in your discourses? For instance, the Metaphysical poets (Donne, Traherne) and the Romantics (Wordsworth) would chime in well when explaining the lovely Nature poetry which is part of the hymns of the Azhwars.

Certainly. It is one of those dreams, and I do keep reading and memorising whenever I find the time, for this does help in relating to the youth, which has distanced itself from Sanskrit and the regional language.

Already, it is heartening that the youth generation looks up to you with great hopes. You have been trying to assure young people that spirituality and materialism can be balanced in one's personal life. Could you kindly explain this concept?

Why, are the two really irreconcilable? We have to tell the youth that an integral view alone can assure them of a great future. Material success is not helping them, as I look on aghast at the increase in tension and frustration among the youth. On and on and up and up. But where to? They have to return to their rich spiritual past to overcome these evils of modern life. At the same time, the times of self-abnegation and remaining rooted in one's past are gone. The younger generation has to make provisions for a comfortable life and this is possible only with secular education. I keep telling them that they should cultivate both; and it is not all that difficult either.

My friends in the United States speak glowingly of how they listen to your tele-lectures. Obviously you are able to build a wonderful rapport with unseen audiences. But this lack of a live audience whom you can see must be a disadvantage. So how do you manage to succeed?

It is obviously not fair to subjects like the Ramayana, the Puranas and the hymns of the Azhwars if one does not plunge into the waves of experience. Anubhava is very important. The speaker has to experience the emotions and convey them to the audience and the audience in turn inspires the speaker to revel in the emotion generated by the text. This is not possible when one has to stare at a splendidly null, icily cold recording instrument. I have managed to overcome this problem by inviting a select audience when recording for tele-lectures. It has been better since I have gone abroad and met the audiences in various places in the States.

Now I have a good feel of their reception and know that a different type of examples is needed to keep their attention. It has become much easier now, like using similes such as the stock market and world situation to get my points across.

We have been hearing so much of your attempts to renovate existing temples known as Divya Desas. How many temples have you managed to cover in this manner?

A couple of decades ago, a Mangalasasana Divyadesa Samrakshana Trust was formed by Sri Krishnapremi, Mrs. Y. G. Parthasarathy and my father. After my father, I have been a member of the Trust. Now the Trust is supporting 52 temples by paying salaries for priests and helping with repairs. The Trust also celebrates Vaikunta Ekadesi in these temples so that devotees are being drawn in greater number to worship in these places.

You have also built a new temple in Kerala. Why?

Of the 12 Azhwars, eleven have been consecrated in temples in the places where they were born. But not Kulasekhara Azhwar till now. It all began when a devotee asked me where Thiruvanjikkalam was in Kerala and I did not know! That set me thinking and a couple of friends helped me locate it. There was indeed a small temple to Mukunda and they said it was built by one Kulasekhara. Luckily I came in touch with a scholar, the elderly Sri Induchoodan who has published a book on the kshetra. From him I learnt that there were six Kulaleskharas in that dynasty and the first was the Azhwar, the second was the Saiva Nayanar. It was interesting to learn that the third Kulasekhara was a Muslim and he built the first mosque in Kerala. The book has recorded in detail Kulasekhara's connection with Srirangam and the legend of Cherakulavalli Nachiyar.

We approached the Cochin Dewaswom Board, which kindly allotted a piece of land in Tiruvanjikkalam, and now our Nammazhwar Foundation has built a nice temple. There were initially some problems but local enthusiasm has been overwhelming and the temple was consecrated on November 22, on Kaisika Guruvayoor Ekadesi in the presence of 5,000 devotees. The temple follows the Pancharatra Agama and has a Srivaishnava priest. We have used the Thanjavur style of architecture for the temple.

Is temple worship a must for Sri Vaishnavism? Have you tried to work in any other line that concerns it?

Temple worship is an integral part of Sri Vaishnavism. Going to temple and praying there is itself

an important discipline for our day-to-day life. However, when one goes to a temple, one must remember that he is treading consecrated ground and must not indulge in unnecessary talk. A prayerful mood in a temple can do wonders for the psyche, for temples have a special ambience that one cannot have in houses or meeting halls.

As for my work in other fields, I strongly feel that it is to be one of advice. However, one of my dreams is to start a school that would integrate traditional lore with secular studies.

Aren't you already helping patasalas that teach the Vedas and the hymns of the Azhwars? Could you give me an idea of what exactly you are doing in this context?

So far my Nammazhwar Foundation has only been trying to spread this idea of an integrated approach to studies. The Foundation is already supporting 26 children in Azhwar Tirunagari. We pay their fees and give them a stipend towards other expenses and they study in the local school. But they come to the Patasala in the evenings and learn the Vedas and Prabandhams for a couple of hours. Indeed, there is no choice for the younger generation if it wants to avoid mental turmoil. The youngsters must learn the received tradition of our ancient seers and at the same time get a modern education that would help them gain a proper living.

You place so much faith in the Vedas and the hymns of the Azhwars and even support patasalas for teaching them. Do you feel this ancient body of hymns is relevant for our times?

Absolutely. I feel sad that our younger generation that is doing very well in studies is sadly neglecting the Tamil language. They must know Tamil to imbibe the best in our culture as reflected in Tamil literature and of course, the "Nalayira Divya Prabandham." Remember, the hymns of the Azhwars are not mere prayers. They are also perfect guides for leading an upright life. If one learns them with good understanding, he will be definitely safe from committing any moral turpitude.

Such faith in the value of traditional lore is inspiring. But you must also remember that we are living at a time when terrorism is stalking the globe. What role has then the satvik Sri Vaishnavism in this world, with its constant emphasis on Surrender?

Terrorism is not the sole reality about this world. There are also wonderful pastures that call for great efforts to gain greater realisations. As Tondaradippodi Azhwar advised, if you come across evil and cannot overcome it, just keep away from it and pursue your goal. Like making a strategic withdrawal. Why go in for head-on collisions?

Thank you very much. One last query (you could say, curiosity). Are you training any disciples to bring this sterling zeal for the spread of Sri Vaishnavism? I mean, to speak of a Velukkudi Parampara?

I have four or five very promising disciples who are getting trained by me. Of course, I am delighted that my own sons have shown much promise. So I am sure what you call the Velukkudi Parampara will continue to serve the cause of Sri Vaishnavism in the future as well.